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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2090  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5338  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8931  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6507  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1744  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 2111  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0592  
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2325  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4339  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000187

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; INR/EAP  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2019

TAGS: BM EAID PGOV PREL SOCI

SUBJECT: BURMA: REACTIONS TO THE "AFTER THE STORM" REPORT

REF: A) BANGKOK 504 B) 08 RANGOON 371 C) 08 RANGOON  
357 D) RANGOON 51 E) 08 RANGOON 365

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Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4  
(b and d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) Officials from the UN and international NGOs, including International Development Enterprises (IDE), Save the Children, and CARE, have criticized the findings of a recent assessment of Cyclone Nargis assistance conducted by Johns Hopkins and the Emergency Assistance Team (EAT) based in Thailand. A number of Embassy contacts highlight flaws in the report's research methodology and note that it fails to demonstrate how coordination between the international community and the GOB markedly improved after the first month. Some argue that the report is politically motivated. Researchers for the report seem not to have contacted any of the major INGOs working in Burma after the storm and reportedly have refused to discuss their findings with either the UN or INGOs based here. UN Resident Coordinator Bishow Parajuli laments that Johns Hopkins endorsed this biased report, arguing that it undermines the school's credibility to conduct fair and balanced research. The NGO community plans to release a statement attempting to correct the report and detailing the nuances of providing relief assistance in Burma. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In March, Mae Sot-based NGO Emergency Assistance Team (EAT) and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health released its report, "After the Storm: Voices from the Delta," described to be an independent assessment of

post-Cyclone Nargis assistance (Ref A). The report, which is highly critical of relief efforts, is based on 90 interviews of alleged cyclone survivors and relief providers conducted by the organizations on two separate occasions in June and November 2008. The report concluded that the regime confiscated assistance, obstructed relief delivery efforts, discriminated against certain populations, forcibly relocated cyclone survivors, and used forced labor in reconstruction efforts.

#### NGOs and UN Speak Out

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¶3. (C) INGOS and UN agency personnel based in Rangoon have reacted viscerally to the report. Nearly all acknowledge that the GOB unnecessarily complicated assistance delivery to cyclone victims in the chaotic first month immediately after the storm. However, our contacts point out that many of these issues were resolved within the first few weeks of the relief effort. Debbie Aung Din Taylor, Country Director of IDE, commented that the report provides a simplistic snapshot of early relief efforts, rather than a more accurate and nuanced view of how those efforts progressed over time. Several INGO managers emphasized that working in Burma can be challenging, but it can be done without compromising the integrity of assistance efforts or NGO standards. They complained that the report fails to detail how the UN, ASEAN, and NGOs worked with the GOB to resolve assistance-delivery problems.

¶4. (C) Several of our NGO contacts criticized the report methodology, noting that the organizations conducted most interviews in Mae Sot rather than with those inside Burma.

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INGO representatives questioned whether "victims" living in Mae Sot have a true grasp of the operations on the ground. Most testimonials cited in the report date back to June 2008, and provide a limited picture of how relief efforts have evolved during the past 10 months. The EAT/Johns Hopkins team claims to have interviewed 33 relief workers; however, representatives from Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Save the Children, CARE, and Pact -- four organizations that account for more than 70 percent of relief efforts on the ground -- claim that none of their staff were interviewed for this report. Additionally, UN Resident Coordinator Bishow Parajuli and heads of several other UN agencies in Burma informed us that the EAT/Johns Hopkins team did not contact any UN officials for their perspectives on Cyclone Nargis relief operations nor have researchers responded to UN inquiries about the report findings.

¶5. (C) David Tegenfeldt, Country Director of Hope International, suggested that several of the individuals affiliated with the EAT/Johns Hopkins report lack objectivity regarding Burma, and several NGOs in Burma have had negative dealings with members of the Johns Hopkins research team. Additionally, NGO contacts believe that Johns Hopkins' previous research, focused on human rights abuses in Burma (of which there are many), has influenced the report's conclusions about humanitarian assistance. Because the organizations involved have a political agenda, their findings cannot be considered "independent," Tegenfeldt stated. Parajuli lamented that Johns Hopkins School of Public Health endorsed this report, stating that the endorsement provides credibility the report does not deserve.

#### Responding to Specific Accusations

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¶6. (C) The EAT/Johns Hopkins report asserts that no foreign relief agencies or NGOs were able to access the Delta in May. In reality, NGOs with established offices in Rangoon were able to respond immediately to the cyclone: Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF)-Holland and PSI had doctors in the Irrawaddy

Delta within 48 hours of the storm. Andrew Kirkwood, Save the Children Country Director, notes that while it took two weeks to bring in international experts, NGOs were able to send local staff to the Delta immediately. Chris Kaye, Country Director of World Food Programme and member of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), told us that the UN began relief flights by May 10. The USG air bridge began on May 12 (Refs B and C). According to the UN, more than 3,400 visas have been issued to relief providers through the TCG mechanism since May 2008.

¶7. (C) According to ILO Liaison Officer Steve Marshall, most reports of forced labor in the delta were anecdotal and remain unconfirmed. During a recent trip to the Delta, Marshall learned of two instances when local authorities required villagers to assist with clearing debris from roads and buildings. In both instances, the villagers refused to file a compliant. Marshall and the Director General of Labor conducted several successful awareness training programs in the Delta, after which the Director General told the participants (local authorities, police, and military officials) that they "had been warned and had no excuse for any future incidents" (Ref D).

¶8. (C) The report alleges substantial misappropriation of relief supplies, claiming the GOB confiscated and resold many

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goods. In the aftermath of the cyclone, Embassy Rangoon and USAID/OFDA officials met with NGO partners to monitor and evaluate the provision of relief goods. We found no misappropriation. Additionally, Embassy officers and staff combed the Rangoon markets, where many relief goods were allegedly being sold, but found no evidence that the GOB was selling relief supplies (Ref E). We encouraged our contacts to share with us any evidence of misappropriation and received several reports. However, in each case, it turned out that the allegedly misappropriated relief supplies were in fact commercial products that our contacts had never seen before. (Note: Our economic contacts believed this was likely the result of Rangoon merchants obtaining products via new land-based supply lines from Thailand and upper Burma while the port was being repaired).

NGOs to Release Coordinated Response to the Report

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¶9. (C) According to Andrew Kirkwood, Country Director of Save the Children, NGO directors have met on three separate occasions to discuss the best way to respond to the EAT/Johns Hopkins report. The NGO community plans to release a press statement by March 27, arguing that the report distorts the truth and detailing how NGOs have been able to provide assistance successfully to more than two million beneficiaries in Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions since the cyclone.

Comment

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¶10. (C) The Burmese regime continues to abuse its people's basic human rights. We frequently report instances of such abuses. Certainly, the Burma Government's initial response to Cyclone Nargis was deeply flawed. However, based on Embassy Rangoon's own observations and discussions with contacts, the EAT/Johns Hopkins report does not provide an accurate account of the Cyclone Nargis response over time. After the initial challenging, even chaotic few weeks, the situation improved markedly. The Tripartite Core Group (TCG) process among ASEAN, the UN, and the Government of Burma helped smooth arrival of staff and delivery of goods. We have detailed in a number of reports since May 2008 how the situation improved. EAT and Johns Hopkins are certainly entitled to their opinions on the Nargis relief efforts; however, it appears they failed to consult UN organizations and INGOs that have provided the bulk of post-Nargis assistance on the

ground. Had they researched more broadly and thoroughly, the story in the report would surely have been significantly more nuanced. Again, there is no disputing that difficulties occurred. This is Burma after all. But the post-Nargis operation to a large extent has been a success story, bringing essential relief to huge numbers of desperately needy people.

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